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SIR JAMES MURRAY

1837-1915

JAMES AUGUSTUS HENRY MURRAY was born at Denholm, near Hawick, Roxburghshire, in 1837. He received his early education at the parish school in his native village, and afterwards at another school in the neighbourhood, where he acquired the rudiments of Latin, French, and Greek. At the age of eighteen he became an assistant master in the Hawick Grammar School, and, three years later, head master of a school at Hawick called the 'Subscription Academy'. Here he assiduously pursued his studies, gaining a good working knowledge of several languages, and some acquaintance with the researches both of native and foreign scholars in the history of English and its relation to the kindred tongues. He also devoted much attention to the study of the local dialect. His love of knowledge, however, by no means confined itself to philology; indeed he was accustomed to say that in early life he was much more strongly attracted to natural science than to the studies to which in later years he was chiefly devoted. There seems, indeed, to have been no branch of natural or physical science of which he had not more than a merely elementary knowledge, and even in advanced age a new discovery always excited his keen interest. The Transactions of the Hawick Archaeological Society, of which he was one of the founders, and for some time the secretary, contain many papers from his pen on the history, antiquities, natural history, geology, and languages of the Border Counties.

After some years spent in teaching at Hawick, he removed to London, where he obtained a position in the Chartered Bank of India. His first wife died in 1864, and in 1867 he married Ada Agnes, daughter of George Ruthven of Kendal. In 1870 he became a master in Mill Hill School, a position which he held for fifteen years.

His residence in and near London gave him the opportunity of frequent intercourse with the distinguished group of scholars—including Furnivall, Skeat, Sweet, and Richard Morris—who were zealously labouring in the investigation of the history of the English language, and the publication and illustration of the older English literature. By this circle Murray was welcomed as a collaborator of extraordinary ability and attainments. To the publications of the Early English Text

PROCEEDINGS OF THE BRITISH ACADEMY

Society he contributed editions of *The Minor Poems of Sir David Lyndesay* (1871), *The Complaynt of Scotland* (1874), and *The Romance and Prophecies of Thomas of Erceldoune* (1875). For several years he contributed largely to the columns of the *Athenæum*. It was in this journal, in a review of Skeat's edition of the Anglo-Saxon and Northumbrian Gospels (April 3, 1875), that he published his brilliant discovery of the relation between the Old English glosses in the Lindisfarne MS. and those in the Rushworth MS.

In 1873 the Philological Society issued his memorable book on *The Dialect of the Southern Counties of Scotland*, which may be said to have laid the foundations of the scientific study of the local varieties of English speech, and even at the present day remains in some respects an unsurpassed model of methodical investigation in this department. The value of the work did not consist solely in the large amount of accurate information which it contained on its special subject. By its insistence on the true principles of philological inquiry, which at that time were familiar in this country only to a few, and by the illustration which those principles received in their application to particular problems, it had an appreciable effect on the progress of linguistic science in general. Written in a popular style, it found not a few interested readers among those who had no acquaintance with philology. The book received much favourable notice in the press, and in 1874 the University of Edinburgh conferred on the author the degree of LL.D. in recognition of its merit. His article on 'English Language', published in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* in 1878, though extending only to twelve pages, was by far the most complete and accurate historical survey of the subject that had up to that time appeared, and established the writer's reputation as one of the most accomplished scholars in English philology.

It was through his connexion with the Philological Society that Murray was led to undertake the gigantic task which absorbed his whole energies during the last thirty-six years of his life. In 1857, at the suggestion of Dr. Trench, then Dean of Westminster, afterwards Archbishop of Dublin, the Society had committed itself to the preparation of a great historical dictionary of the English language, in which the whole literary vocabulary from the middle of the twelfth century should, so far as possible, be included, the history of every word with regard to changes of form and meaning from the time of its earliest occurrence being recorded and illustrated by dated quotations. The scheme was taken up with great enthusiasm and energy, some hundreds of persons being induced to co-operate, without fee or reward, in providing the body of quotations that was to serve as the

basis of the work. Mr. Herbert Coleridge, as the designated editor of the dictionary, zealously devoted himself to the task of reducing to order the ever-growing mass of material, but his early death in 1861 seemed to threaten the collapse of the enterprise. Probably this would have ensued but for the resolute zeal of Furnivall, who stepped into Coleridge's place as editor, encouraged the workers to continue their contributions, and endeavoured, as far as his many occupations would permit, to grapple with the enormous difficulty of arranging the accumulated quotations. After some years he was obliged to give up the struggle; but he continued to cherish the confident hope of being able to get the work taken in hand by some scholar inspired by an enthusiasm equal to his own, and possessing the indispensable qualifications in which he acknowledged himself to be lacking. There was much excuse for those who thought it impossible that 'the Society's Dictionary', of which Furnivall was continually talking, would ever see the light. To find a scholar qualified by knowledge and ability for the work, and able and willing to devote to it the enormous amount of time and effort that it would demand, might well seem hopeless; and even if this difficulty were surmounted there remained another difficulty not less formidable. It had come to be recognized that if the Dictionary was to fulfil efficiently its intended purpose, it must be on a scale so large that no ordinary publisher could be expected to undertake to bring it out. At length Murray, who by the general consent of all who were interested in the scheme was the only man capable of the work, was induced to accept the post of editor, and in 1879 an agreement was made between the Philological Society and the Delegates of the Oxford University Press, by which the latter body took upon itself the burden of publication. The great collection of quotation slips was removed to Mill Hill, an iron building, which became well known as 'Dr. Murray's Scriptorium', being erected in the editor's garden for its reception and the accommodation of the workers.

The activity displayed by Murray during the next few years cannot be contemplated without amazement. When he came to examine the material accumulated on his shelves, he found that, although amounting to a million and a half of slips, it was utterly inadequate for its purpose. He therefore at once set himself to enlist a new army of voluntary workers to supply its deficiencies, and to aid in the preliminary arrangement of the continually increasing mass. It was necessary to correspond constantly with these outside helpers, to assign to them their respective shares in the work, to instruct them in methods of operation, and to keep records of their progress. All these labours, together with those more immediately connected with

the preparation of copy for the press (including a large amount of correspondence relating to scientific and technological points), had to be carried on concurrently with the discharge of the editor's duties as a schoolmaster. To any one who can appreciate the magnitude of the task, and the unfavourable conditions under which the editor laboured, it will seem wonderful that it was possible to issue the first part of the Dictionary, extending to the word *Ant*, and containing 352 pages, so early as January 1884.

This first instalment was at once recognized by all competent critics in Europe and America as fully satisfying the high expectations that had been formed. The value of the new historical method of treatment and the lucidity of the typographical arrangement (then a novel feature in works of the kind, though it has since been extensively copied) could not escape the notice of any educated reader, though it was only the few that could adequately appreciate the skilful presentation of the development of meaning in words, or the greatness of the advance in scientific precision shown in the etymological part of the work. In 1885 the second part (*Ant—Batten*) was published, and Murray removed from Mill Hill to Oxford, in order to devote his whole time to the Dictionary.

When Murray began his labours, it was estimated that the Dictionary would extend at most to seven thousand pages, and might be completed by a single editor, with only a few assistants, in something like ten years. It may well be doubted whether he would not have refused to venture on the task if he had foreseen that the work, though shared eventually with three other editors, was destined to engross the remaining thirty-six years of his life, and to be still unfinished after his death. In 1885 it was evident that the original estimate of the time required for the completion of the Dictionary had been far too sanguine. Still, when allowance was made for the time consumed in preliminary labours that would not need to be repeated, the progress made seemed to encourage the hope that, under the more favourable conditions now established, the end would be reached well within the limits of the nineteenth century. It was very soon found, however, that the first two sections afforded no adequate measure of the difficulties to be encountered in the ensuing portions of the work. The portion of the English vocabulary hitherto dealt with included hardly any of those words that have come down from the earliest period of the language, developing in every century an abundance of new meanings and constructions, which former lexicographers had ignored, but which the plan of the new Dictionary required to be accurately ascertained by the light of the quotations, and arranged in genea-

logical order. The words beginning with 'A' include a multitude (quite without parallel elsewhere) of classical derivatives containing Greek and Latin prefixes; and though some of these words had an interesting history that had never been fully exhibited, the vast majority had been used in only one or two senses, to which sufficient justice had been done by lexicographers from Johnson onwards. Under the letter 'B', as in most other parts of the alphabet, a very large proportion of the words can in an ordinary dictionary quite rightly be disposed of in a few lines, but in an historical dictionary require elaborate treatment. It therefore became necessary, if the completeness of exposition and illustration, which was the peculiar merit of the published portions of the Dictionary, was to be maintained, to exceed the limits of space originally contemplated. Another serious difficulty was created by the daily increasing mass of quotations. Although only a small proportion of these could be used, nothing could be rejected without examination; and the new material constantly revealed the existence of words and senses of words previously unknown. The slowness of progress due to these causes was a source of grave disappointment to the editor and to the authorities of the Oxford Press. Long before the end of the letter 'B' had been reached, it was felt that the work was too vast to be accomplished by a single responsible editor. It was therefore decided that the present writer, after working for a year under Dr. Murray's supervision, should be entrusted with the production of a separate part of the Dictionary, beginning with the letter 'E'. My work as independent editor began in 1889. The ten years once regarded as the probable term for the completion of the Dictionary had passed, and the end of the letter 'C' had not nearly been reached. It cannot have been without a painful sense of disappointment that Murray found himself under the necessity of resigning to an untried man a share in the direction of his great undertaking; but he spared no pains to ensure that the quality of the work should suffer as little as possible from the inexperience of his colleague. I shall always remember with gratitude the abundant help which I received from him in the shape of criticism of my earlier efforts, and suggestion of the authorities to be consulted on points of science, technology, or history.

Although the Dictionary had now two editors, each with his own staff of assistants, the acceleration of its progress continued to fall short of what was expected and desired. It is easy to perceive, after the event, that this was inevitable. The addition of new quotations to the already unwieldy mass continued to go on

incessantly ; the advance of science and industry, and the unexampled literary activity of the age, were daily bringing into use a multitude of new words, and developing new applications of words, which needed to be explained and traced to their sources ; the historical treatment of the older words became more and more difficult and voluminous as the gaps in their record were filled up ; and the constant struggle to prevent the scale of the work from exceeding all permissible limits, with as little sacrifice as possible of valuable illustrative matter, involved the expenditure of many hours in labour that had no visible result. At the end of the nineteenth century, when Dr. Murray had been at work for twenty years, and his colleague for half as long, the Dictionary was still not half finished. It had long been strongly urged by several persons that there was need for the appointment of a third editor, and the Delegates of the Clarendon Press were now fortunate enough to secure the services of Mr. W. A. Craigie, a scholar perhaps uniquely qualified by ability and training for the work, who is now Professor of Anglo-Saxon in the University, but still continues his labours on the Dictionary. In 1913 a fourth editor was appointed, Mr. C. T. Onions, a London graduate, who had been for twenty years a member of the editorial staff.

The thirty years of Murray's life in Oxford were spent in strenuous and almost unceasing toil, wholly devoted to the one sole object. Except for occasional illnesses, a brief yearly holiday, and one absence of some months on a visit to South Africa, his daily labour of many hours went on without interruption from year to year nearly to the end. He wrote no books or articles, and, although he was a Fellow of the British Academy from its foundation, and often attended its meetings, he never found time to contribute to its Proceedings. He was an acceptable popular lecturer, but the subject was always the Dictionary. He might, if he had so chosen, have left many monuments of his great and various powers, but he thought it his duty to devote his whole strength to the accomplishment of the one great undertaking to which he had pledged himself. Murray's services to scholarship were recognized by a knighthood conferred in 1908, by honorary degrees from eight universities, including Oxford and Cambridge, and by membership of many learned societies. He was happy in his family life, and enjoyed a rare exemption from bereavement, his wife and eleven children having survived him. He had great cause for satisfaction in the distinctions gained by his children ; one of his sons is Sir Oswyn Murray, now Permanent Secretary to the Admiralty.

In the year 1915 he was attacked by serious illness, and his life for a time was despaired of. He made a wonderful recovery, and in June

I found him again hard at work, showing marked signs of physical weakness, but ready to discuss etymological problems with his accustomed lucidity and acuteness. There seemed to be reason to hope that he might still have some years of work before him; but he presumed too much on his recovered strength, and his exertions brought on the illness from which he died on the 26th of July.

Until the hand of death was upon him he never ceased to cherish the hope of living to celebrate the completion of the Dictionary. Although this crowning satisfaction was denied him, he was permitted to see the work so far advanced that there was no longer any cause to fear that it might not be carried through to the end; and he was able to take his full share in it almost to the close of his life. Even in his last days the quality of his workmanship would have done no discredit to his prime. The great English dictionary will always be known chiefly by his name, with far stronger reason than the great German dictionary bears the name of Grimm. It is to his marvellous energy in the organization and direction of a new body of readers that the work is indebted for by far the greater part of the vast collection of material on which its value so largely depends. The portions of the Dictionary for which he was personally responsible amount to about one half of the whole, and in the quality of their workmanship leave all earlier lexicography far behind. The colleagues who have shared and continued his labours owe to his example not a little of what is best in their own work. When the remaining part of the last volume is finished, the Oxford English Dictionary will stand unrivalled in its completeness as a record of the history of the vocabulary of a living language, and it is to Murray far more than to any other man that the honour of this great achievement will belong.

HENRY BRADLEY.



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